

Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama defeat UMW sellout, continue strike

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Striking coal miners in central Alabama on Friday voted 1,006 to 45 in an overwhelming repudiation of the efforts by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) to impose a pro-company contract on 1,100 workers at Warrior Met Coal.

The miners are continuing their strike, which began on April 1, to win back concessions accepted by the UMWA five years ago. In doing so, they are defying the company's strikebreaking operation, intimidation by Alabama state troopers and the sabotage of the UMWA.

During informational meetings Wednesday, rank-and-file miners shouted down UMWA President Cecil Roberts and denounced him as a sellout for agreeing to a five-year deal which restored only \$1.50 out of the \$6-an-hour pay cut workers suffered in 2016. The company's brutal disciplinary policy, which has resulted in countless unjust terminations, would have been kept in place under the deal, only with six strikes before dismissal instead of four.

Since the 2016 concessions, which the union said were necessary to bring the company out of bankruptcy, Warrior Met has gotten record coal production and profits out of the workers. It made \$302 million in 2019, while CEO Walter J. Scheller, III has pocketed an annual salary of over \$4 million even during the pandemic.

Outside the union meeting Friday miners and their children burned copies of the contract. One worker circulated a photo of his "No" ballot. On top of it, he placed his left hand, which is conspicuously missing an index finger he lost in a mine accident.

"People have died working in these mines," a veteran miner told the *World Socialist Web Site*, referring to the death in 2013 of a 36-year-old miner who was crushed in a conveyor belt. "The workers want \$27 or \$28 as

starting pay and 100 percent company-paid insurance, not \$23 an hour and 80-20 copays. We also want 12 strikes not six.

"At the #4 Mine, the vote was 256 'no' and only seven 'yes.' At the #7 Mine, it was 750 against and only 38 for it. Since Wednesday, we haven't seen Roberts around here anymore. At the meeting, the local union leaders kept saying, 'It's up to us. If we vote no, they'll go back to the bargaining table.' I hate to say this, but Local Union President Carl White and UMWA District 20 Field Representative Larry Spencer are Cecil Roberts' personal lapdogs.

"The company is calling some brothers under cover to sneak them in the mine, but they said no. I've talked to 10 so far that the company called. We all are happy, very happy. We are united, just the workers only," the miner concluded.

The Warrior Met Coal miners have taken a courageous stand. But it would be dangerous to think that the defeat of the sellout deal will lead to any retreat by the giant corporation or the UMWA. On the contrary, they will redouble their efforts to isolate and intimidate strikers, while the union seeks to starve miners into submission with only \$300 a week in strike benefits. The UMWA sits on top of \$164 million in assets, and Roberts pockets \$210,000 a year.

Standing behind Warrior are powerful corporate, financial and political interests who fear the growing militancy of the working class after a year in which the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers have been sacrificed while trillions of dollars went to the superrich. Over the last month, thousands of ATI steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states, Massachusetts nurses and Columbia University grad student workers have launched strikes to demand living wages and decent working conditions.

For this reason, the Biden administration has tried to promote the unions, not because they organize workers to fight the companies, but because they organize the companies to fight the workers. But Biden's efforts to promote the union drive at the Bessemer Amazon warehouse, 25 miles east of the Warrior mines, was a complete failure because workers rightly see that these corrupt organizations will do nothing to defend them.

Workers need real organizations to fight. That is why the Socialist Equality Party is leading the effort for workers to form rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. In a statement issued Friday calling on workers to reject the UMW-Warrior Met contract, the WSWS wrote:

“Workers must organize independently of this corrupt organization and build a rank-and-file strike committee to take over negotiations and continue the fight. Instead of ending the strike, Warrior Met miners should expand the struggle, demanding a nationwide miners’ strike and solidarity action from workers throughout the area. Delegations of striking miners should go to the US Steel and US Pipe mills in the nearby Birmingham, the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, the Constellium aluminum plant in Muscle Shoals, the Mercedes Benz plant in Vance and schools in Birmingham, Montgomery and other cities where educators are fighting the deadly back-to-school policy.”

In waging their struggle Warrior Met miners must advance demands based on what they need, not on what the company and the UMW say management can afford.

These must include:

- Full restoration of all wage and benefit concessions and a large pay increase to make up for what has been sacrificed.
- Ending of all pay tiers. Equal pay for equal work.
- Abolition of the disciplinary system. The rehiring with back pay all workers who were unjustly terminated.
- The ending of forced overtime and grueling work schedules. Hire additional miners to ease the workload and give workers time with their families.
- Workers’ oversight over health and safety. Appropriate social distancing and daily testing for COVID-19. Workers must have the right to refuse work under unsafe conditions.

In taking up this fight, miners should revive the

powerful traditions of rank-and-file militancy and socialism fought for by earlier generations of workers in Alabama, including the left-wing militants who first built biracial unions in defiance of the coal and steel bosses and their system of racial segregation.

The strike against Warrior Met is part of a nationwide and global movement of workers against the obscene growth of billionaire wealth amid the death caused by the willful negligence of the corporations and their political frontmen, whether it is Trump and the Republicans or Biden and the Democrats.

Workers everywhere are fighting the same global corporations and are increasingly facing the same conditions and problems under a rampaging pandemic. The fight against the sacrifice of workers’ lives for profit must be combined with building an international political movement of the working class for socialism, and the reorganization of society so that the wealth created by the collective labor of workers goes to them, not the wealthy few.

For more information about building rank-and-file committees and to share your story, contact the WSWS today.



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